

POSTAL PRINTER DRIVER SYSTEM AND METHOD

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RELATED APPLICATIONS

Reference is made to the following and commonly assigned U.S. Patent No. 5,983,209 issued November 9, 1999, entitled SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR DETERMINATION OF POSTAL ITEM WEIGHT BY CONTEXT, and to U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 08/953,477 entitled "POSTAGE SERVER SYSTEM AND METHOD," filed October 17, 1997, the disclosures of which are all incorporated herein by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates to printer drivers and more particularly to systems and methods for abstracting certain information from a data stream deliverable to a printer from a computing device, and even more specifically to a system and method for generating and printing address information and postage onto an envelope associated with material printed at the printer.

BACKGROUND

It is now becoming common to use a PC or other general purpose computing device to generate and print postage onto an envelope. The above-identified patent application is an example of the generation of postage from word processing or other application programs running on a PC.

In such systems, a general purpose printer is used to print the postage. The printer operates from a data stream provided by the PC which in turn is working in cooperation with a postage storage and control device. A user creates a document, for example, a letter, using a word processing application program. Contained within the letter is address information which the word processor abstracts and then communicates to a postage generation program (either part of the word processing program or separate therefrom). The postage generation program then accesses a secure memory and creates a postage indicia, part of which contains a digital signal (or other authentication mechanism), and then this indicia data stream is communicated to the general purpose printer. The printer then prints the indicia on an envelope together with the address information for the envelope. In one embodiment of the existing system the secure memory and its control processors are located in the communication path between the PC and the printer.

In operation, the user must first send a data stream to control the printing of the letter and then the user, or the system operating for the user, must send data to the printer to print the address and postage on the envelope or on the label. This typically requires two distinct functions, each controlled by the PC. In addition, at times there is a need to create a window envelope insert, containing the address and/or postage indicia. Again, this requires two separate operations unless the separate insert is made a part of the letter "file" in the PC.

Thus, it is desired to further automate the printing/handling process of material printed by general purpose printers to eliminate as many steps as possible a user must take to print and subsequently process the printed material.

It is further desired to automate the mailing process by automating as many steps in the process as possible.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

These and other objects, features and technical advantages are achieved by a system and method operable in conjunction with a general purpose printer such that the data stream that is sent to the printer from the processor is monitored and certain data is abstracted therefrom such that the abstracted data will operate to control subsequent processing of the printed material. Thus, the data stream that is sent to a printer to enable the printing of a letter, or series of letters, is monitored and certain data, such as, by way of example, address information, is abstracted therefrom. The abstracted address data would then be used to create the address information for the subsequent (or concurrent) printing of an envelope. The abstracted information can also then be used to control the printing (or even the generation) of the postage indicia.

In one embodiment of the invention, the abstracted information is used to create a separate insert containing the address and/or postage indicia. The separate insert is then used within a "see through" type envelope of the type shown in U.S. Design Patent #384,098 dated September 23, 1997, entitled "Stampless Envelope", hereby incorporated by reference herein.

The abstracted information can be used, for example, to print certain information, such as the postage indicia and/or address data concurrently on another printer, or by using a second printing mechanism of the same printer. The abstracted information can also be used to control subsequent processing of the printed paper, such as, by way of example, folding and/or stuffing the printed material in an envelope or to send the data to multiple locations. Because the number of pages actually printed, as well as the weight of the paper is known by the printer, the amount of postage can be easily calculated, all controlled in conjunction with the abstracted information. In addition, the "abstract" could be the entire document (or a portion of the document) which could be sent to some destination other than the printer, such as, for example, a fax to a recipient, an e-mail or even to a storage or other server. The destination could be a web site, a remote print facility or a conversion to another medium, such as a TV signal.

In one embodiment the information is abstracted within the actual printer, while in other embodiments the abstraction occurs between the processor program and the printer device, or even within the processing program itself. Also, the postage storage device, which is typically within the PC or attached to the printer port of the PC, can be located, if desired, within, or in close association with, the printer, or within (or in conjunction with) a printer server.

These and other objects, features and technical advantages are achieved by a system and method in which the print stream is intercepted, either within the printer or external thereto, such that the print output of any software application running on any computer is enhanced to improve the printing process. In particular, bar coding information and/or postage can be added and either an envelope or a label can be printed. In addition, the printed material can be modified by adding certain information (by printing a cover sheet) such that the material can be placed in a window envelope, thereby avoiding the printing of an envelope. Optionally the driver can also control an inserter such that the mailing is automatically inserted into the printed envelope or into a window envelope. Also, labels can be printed and applied to a package, envelope, or sleeve possibly before or after the insertion of the printed mail item.

One important factor is that the output generating software application running in the PC need not be modified. To the application the new system and method could appear to be an optional printing destination, or it might be completely transparent to the PC application program. However, the printer driver could bring up a dialog box to ask the user for options, like envelope or label type and size, location of the area where the address and stamp information is to be printed. In addition, the user could specify where the address is being printed on the letter by the application such that the address can be more easily recognized and thereby more easily abstracted. The system might also request confirmation that real postage needs to be applied versus performing a draft or test printout with dummy postage.

The foregoing has outlined rather broadly the features and technical advantages of the present invention in order that the detailed description of the invention that follows may be better understood. Additional features and advantages of the invention will be described hereinafter which form the subject of the claims of the invention. It should be appreciated by those skilled in the art that the conception and specific embodiment disclosed may be readily utilized as a basis for modifying or designing other structures for carrying out the same purposes of the present invention. It should also be realized by those skilled in the art that such equivalent constructions do not depart from the spirit and scope of the invention as set forth in the appended claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

For a more complete understanding of the present invention, and the advantages thereof, reference is now made to the following descriptions taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawing, in which:

5 FIGURE 1 shows a printer driven by a PC;

FIGURE 2 shows details of a printer;

FIGURE 3 shows the printer and output of a letter and envelope with information having been abstracted from the data stream;

10 FIGURE 4 shows a mass mailing process using the systems and methods of this invention; and

FIGURE 5 shows the flow chart of a typical system operation.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Turning now to FIGURE 1, there is shown in one embodiment system 10 which includes, for example, PC 11, communicating via link 12 to printer 20, and associated with printer 20 is one or more auxiliary devices 13 which are optional as will be discussed in more detail hereinafter. Printer 20 may have several paper trays 14 and 15 and may have output tray 16. Printer 20 can be any one of the well known printers available in the industry as well as PC 11 which could be any personal computer or other processor, or in fact, could be any device that creates a stream of data for subsequent printing or display at printer 20. Also note that printer 20 could be a display for a computer or television to which data is sent.

As will be seen in one embodiment, postage is created at PC 11, which postage is associated with a particular letter or with a particular envelope. This postage indicia is sent from a computing device to a printer as discussed in the above-identified patent application entitled SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR DETERMINATION OF POSTAL ITEM WEIGHT BY CONTEXT. As will be discussed, the indicia is sent via link 12 to the printer, together with other information. Printer 20 then abstracts data from the data stream, including, if desired, the indicia information, and also abstracts from the material to be printed certain other information. For example, the address information of the sender and the recipient can be abstracted, and then subsequently or concurrently printed using either a separate print head, an auxiliary print head on a different machine, or the same print head on the main machine at a time prior or subsequent to when the letter is actually printed. It should also be noted that auxiliary device 13 could be a folding machine or a stuffer or a combination so that the abstracted information will provide information for subsequent printing operations after the main printing operation. In addition, the abstracted information could generate a cover sheet, a fax sheet, or any other information which could be sent concurrently or separately from the printed information. For example, the abstracted information could be used to send an e-mail to a recipient indicating when the letter is being posted and the tracking Id of the letter, if desired, or could send an e-mail or other information back to a sender for logging the

information into a file or into a data base for subsequent retrieval. In some situations, the entire document (or most of it) will become the abstracted information. This primarily will be when it is desired to send the document (or key portions of it) to one or more other locations, such as a web site, or as a fax, or e-mail or to place the document in a memory or on a server.

5 The abstracted information could, for example, be graphics (or some other special data), which graphics would then be routed to a different printer or to a different presentation medium. Also the system could detect different applications (Word, WordPerfect, Excel) and send each to a different location. The system could be designed to key on certain fields, or on certain codes, and depending on such fields (or codes) redirect either one entire document or portion
10 of the document to the ancillary facility. Auxiliary devices 13 could be any number of devices, either locally or remote, and could be print devices, storage devices, media change devices, web sites, fax transmissions, e-mail-type transmissions, and/or conversion applications. Data transfer can occur in any one of a number of ways. One such way could be, for example, U.S. Patent 5,826,034, which is hereby incorporated by reference herein.
15 Another example is the aforementioned patent application entitled Postage Server System and Method.

FIGURE 2 shows details of a typical printer 20 where the information would ask through scanned data abstract device 21 which would operate to remove certain data from the data stream. The data that is removed could, for example, be stored in an instruction memory
20 22, which memory could be programmed at one time or could be programmed to change from time to time based upon information sent over the input directly to instruction memory 22, or received in the other manner. These instructions could be used to determine what types of data are being abstracted and could be used to change the output auxiliary devices 13 as desired. CPU 25 could be used, if desired, to control the processing (such as scanning of the
25 data flow and/or comparisons and verifications) and to control the generation of a postage indicia via postage control device 26 in situations where the postage indicia is not sent from the computing device such as PC 11 to the printer in the initial data transmission. Scanned data device 21 then can store the abstracted information in auxiliary print store 23 for delivery

to an ancillary facility, such as for subsequent printing using an auxiliary print head 24 or using the main print head of the printer (not shown) or sent to an auxiliary device 13 shown in FIGURE 1. Note that auxiliary print head 24 is optional and can be, for example, a printer that only prints envelopes (or labels) or only prints certain types of documents using separate types of paper, different color paper, or using different paper trays.

FIGURE 3 shows printer 20 having its output tray 16 feeding out letter 30 and corresponding envelope 35 with postage indicia 36, including, if desired, bar codes and other security information 37. They could come out simultaneously using different print heads or could come out serially and then be correlated together. Different physical printers could be used to print different portions of a document, if desired. Letter 30 has on it the sender's information such as letterhead 33, the receiver's information such as address information 31, and of course the bulk of the letter 32. The envelope 34 would then have on it the abstracted information which would include the return address 33, which was abstracted from the letterhead, the recipient address 31, which was abstracted from the addressee information of the letter, and indicia 36, which would either have been abstracted from the data stream or created, as discussed above with respect to FIGURE 2. If created from the abstracted data, the system would operate in conjunction with a PC postage system, such as obtainable from E-Stamp Corporation, using a secure postage metering system (not shown) located in conjunction with the data stream. The system could also log onto a network connection, either a LAN or a public network (such as the internet) and obtain a postal indicia, or other material (or instructions) to be used in conjunction with a printed document.

FIGURE 4 shows a representation of a mass mailing system where several letters 41, 42, 43 are sequentially printed and their corresponding envelopes 41A, 42A, 43A are sequentially coordinated such that folded stuffer 44 then can take the information, the letters, fold them and put them into the proper envelopes and place them in mailbox 45.

FIGURE 5 shows a flow chart where box 501 allows a software application to generate output. This output is (optionally) allowed, box 502, to redirect output to a printer server. If

the printer server, box 503, is used it will then control the process. If a print server is not available, then the postal printer driver scans the output as shown in box 504. Optionally, box 505, allows the postal printer driver to prompt the user for options, using a dialog box, box 506, or other mechanism, box 507.

5 The postal printer driver passes the original or modified/enhanced output onto the printer or to the printer's regular printer driver. The printer may be local, remote, or accessible through a print server. The printer's driver generates the printer specific control codes and passes them to the printer. The printer prints the contents to be mailed as shown in box 508. Optionally, the postal printer driver generates additional print output for envelopes or labels and sends this data to the same printer as is used for the main document, boxes 509, 511, or to a dedicated printer, box 509, 510 which prints the mailing data.

10 The postal printer driver can, optionally, control optional equipment, boxes 512 and 513, like folder and/or inserter and/or label application equipment. This system can be used in conjunction with the Postage Server System and method, as identified above. It should be noted that the printer driver (which can, for example, be elements 21, 22 in FIGURE 2) can be executed on the original computer, a network server or spooling device, or within the printer. Also, many of the steps can be reversed or eliminated.

15 Interception and/or abstraction can occur at different levels: Microsoft Windows provides a printer driver architecture which allows any Windows application software to print to any printer through a printer driver interface such that the application need not be aware of the specifics of any particular printer. This provides for a printer driver layer between the application and the printer which translates output and information requests from an application to the printer specific control commands. The invention could be implemented by adding a postal layer between the application and the application and the printer driver. To the application this layer looks like a printer driver and to the printer driver it looks like an application. Microsoft Windows NT and Windows 2000 provide a print queue processor which is invoked by the spooler to send queued print data through the printer driver to a

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printer. The print queue processor could be enhanced to provide the functionality described herein.

Some of the functionality could also be provided through a special printer. The printer can accept the print output from an application running on a computer and then interpret it and enhance it as described in this patent. This functionality is in addition to that performed currently in the PFE Mailprinter. This additional functionality would be, for example, the addition of a cover page to support window envelopes or the generation of a postage indicia as displayed above.

First the postal driver must scan the application output and determine the beginning and end of a mail item. This is straightforward if only a single mail item is generated or if a new print job is generated for each mail item. Some applications however might generate multiple mail items in batch (for example a billing application might generate several invoices or a word processor might perform a mail merge) and not separate such mail items specifically in a print job. In these situations the postal driver must scan the print job to separate it into individual mail items. This could be accomplished by scanning each page for a mailing date, a return, and/or a destination address or for a similar (repeat) layout as the first page. In any case, the postal driver might want to identify and process the destination address for inclusion in the postage generation, and include the calculation of the postage amount. It might also process the destination address further, by performing reformatting or address validating against address databases (either stored in the printer or remotely accessible) to then print the address on an envelope or label and to generate further bar codes like the Postnet bar code required by the USPS. The postal driver might also identify the size of each mail item, meaning the number of pages, and use this information to calculate the postage amount.

The system and method could abstract certain information, or based on certain parameters (such as page count, control codes, return address data, etc.), and then bring up a dialog screen to allow the user to answer questions or to enter data to be used in the subsequent operation. The data to be entered can come, for example, from a user, from

another application or from another system, either local or remote from the printer or printer driver.

As discussed above, the calculation can be local to the printer (if the abstraction occurs at the printer), or the printer can send information back to the PC. Preparation for mailing can be done by printing a label or a sheet of labels; either one label for each mail item or on a separate address and stamp label; either on the same printer or a separate label printer printing a cover page, similar to a fax cover page, containing the destination address, optional return address, and stamp information, as well as additional bar codes required by postal organizations or for tracking purposes to fit into a window envelope. Also note that the printer can be a single stand alone printer, or a group of printers or a printer server. One of the ancillary functions that can be controlled is the normalization of addresses, or other data, so that it fits within a standard. For example, certain words (such as Texas) can be abbreviated properly, or data formats changed to conform to a standard acceptable "look" and position on a document.

Although the present invention and its advantages have been described in detail, it should be understood that various changes, substitutions and alterations can be made herein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims. Moreover, the scope of the present application is not intended to be limited to the particular embodiments of the process, machine, manufacture, composition of matter, means, methods and steps described in the specification. As one of ordinary skill in the art will readily appreciate from the disclosure of the present invention, processes, machines, manufacture, compositions of matter, means, methods, or steps, presently existing or later to be developed that perform substantially the same function or achieve substantially the same result as the corresponding embodiments described herein may be utilized according to the present invention. Accordingly, the appended claims are intended to include within their scope such processes, machines, manufacture, compositions of matter, means, methods, or steps.